

## The Lord is My Shepherd

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Psalm 23 is one of those scriptures that is almost too well known to preach on. Its popularity certainly has something to do with the fact that it is a simple and short psalm with a message of comfort and God's enduring presence in our lives. However, it is well known in our day mostly because it is read at funerals. I think there are only a handful of funerals I've ever officiated or attended where it hasn't been read. And because it speaks directly to the hard times of our lives, a funeral is a good place to read it. But, I think there is more to this little psalm and it deserves to be a part of our lives beyond only funerals.

As I said, this psalm is known as a psalm of comfort, but it is not only meant as comfort. Right out of the gate it also offers a challenge. In the first line alone, the psalm pushes back on two of the most dangerous forms of idolatry that humans have been tempted by in every time and place.

First, the psalm pushes back on the idolatry of worshipping other Gods than God. We don't think much about the very beginning of the psalm "The Lord is my Shepherd" but in the psalmists' time, this was a politically subversive statement. Pastor Shannon Kershner offers this insight about calling God a shepherd:

"When many of us think "shepherd," we think about idyllic pastoral scenes, or we think about the fact it is not a very glamorous job. But probably we do not say "shepherd" and think "rebellious." Yet in scripture, the title "shepherd" is not simply a job description. The title "shepherd" is political. In the ancient world, kings were known as the shepherds of their people. A king was supposed to

provide for and protect the people under his reign, like a shepherd was charged to do for a flock.

But we know from prophets like Ezekiel that kings often failed to do what they were called to do. Ezekiel denounced the actions of the kings he encountered, saying, “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? . . . You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ezekiel 34:2–4). In the ancient world, in the world in which this psalm formed, the title “shepherd” was political.

That fact makes this psalm subversive right off the bat, for when the psalmist states unequivocally “the *Lord* is my Shepherd,” he is stating just as strongly, “And the rest of you are *not*.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Plenty of leaders throughout history have been eager to demand worship and praise from their followers and all too often people have been willing to do just that. Just like the kings of Israel, who were far more often wolves than shepherds, we see plenty of other examples throughout history of the same. Still today we can see examples of leaders who claim to be shepherds. Leaders who demand allegiance, in exchange for, usually false, protections. Leaders who require praise and loyalty in exchange for promises of safety or wealth or power. Woe to those who don’t offer their praise or loyalty or worship, but even those who offer it eventually find out that no human kings or leaders, human politicians or preachers, are able to keep them safe forever.

One place we can see this idolatry on full display today is in the Christian Nationalist movement. Christian nationalists advocate for our identity as Americans to be equal, or often, even more important to one’s identity, as being Christian. They preach that God is

on America's side; that God wants America to succeed more than any other nation and that Christians should have the most power and influence in America. Very often, this movement in the United States is also wrapped up with white supremacy, so that the message is not just that God is on America's side, but white American's side specifically. Nothing could be more at odds with the God of scripture who calls all people beloved, who is shepherd to all.

When we say, "the Lord is my Shepherd" it is a strong assertion of our allegiance to God and God alone – not to charismatic individuals, whether they be politicians, preachers or celebrities; not to movements, parties, or ideologies; not to our country; not even to the church or to our own families. When we look for guidance or protection, it is only God who can give that to us. Anyone else who claims they can, is lying for their own gain and attempting to tempt us into worshipping a false idol. The Lord is my Shepherd – and only the Lord.

Then the line goes on to say, "I shall not want." This is the second idolatry the psalmist speaks about. Coveting or desiring what other people have is not a new problem for humanity. There is a commandment about it from the time of Moses, so we know it's been a problem for a long time. Humans make idols out of our stuff. We are easily susceptible to wanting more, wanting newer, wanting what "they" have.

It's not a new problem, but I think it might be fair to say that today, we face the temptation more intensely than previous generations. Try to go a day without seeing an ad for something somewhere. Try to go a day without seeing or hearing about something someone else has that you don't have and wondering if maybe you should. I think it would be impressive if you made it an hour. Writer Thomas Merton put it this way: "Even though there's a certain freedom in our society, it's largely illusory. . . . It's the freedom to choose your product, but not the freedom to do without it."

But it isn't only stuff. We "want" all kinds of other things too. We want more power, more love, more status, more recognition, more "fill in the blank" that we think will fix everything or complete us. The psalmist invites us to turn away from worshipping the idol of want; of always coveting and desiring; of never feeling satisfied. "I shall not want" is an invitation to free ourselves from the feeling that we are not enough; that we need more and different and "better." "I shall not want" is a reminder that God has created us and called us good. We are enough as we are and we are called to trust that God has provided and will continue to provide for us abundantly.

How will God provide for us? The psalmist goes on to describe green pastures and still waters - true abundance for a sheep. What does a sheep need beyond green pastures and still waters? Green pastures mean enough to eat. Still waters mean not only enough to drink but that they are safe - the kind of water where you can see the bottom and not worry about falling into a current that will sweep you away. God will provide everything we need when we trust God.

Now, in practicality, this doesn't mean we do nothing. The sheep move around based on the shepherd's guidance. So must we. We need to listen for God's guidance and go where God calls us. We need to pay attention to how God is encouraging us to find and use resources. A good shepherd doesn't just look after one sheep or have a favorite group of sheep. A good shepherd is in charge of the whole flock. We are that flock and so part of our listening for God means we know God wouldn't want any small group of us to hog all the best grass or take more than our share of the still waters. If we listened to our shepherd, we would trust God that there is plenty for all and make sure we did our part to share all that God has provided.

Then, we get to the part of the psalm that perhaps people know the best: *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; **for you are with me**; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.”* Fun fact: in the original Hebrew, there are exactly twenty-six words before the statement “You are with me” and twenty-six words after it.

This claim is at the center of the psalm for a reason. The psalmist knows that this promise “you are with me” is the most important part. “You are with me” is the crux of this psalm and is the center of our faith. There is nothing we can do, no place we can go, no trouble we can find ourselves in, where God won’t also be. This is the comfort of this psalm. When we place our trust in God, there is nothing to fear and no place we will be alone. Even when we don’t place our trust in God, God will be with us. No matter what our darkest valley is; whether it is grief or depression, doubt or physical pain, loneliness or shame, God will be there with us. No other person can make that promise. No amount of money or stuff will keep us from the valleys - they may insulate us for a time, but never forever. And when we find ourselves in that place where we feel alone or lost or beyond reach, God is there with us.

The psalmist goes so far as to say that God will keep us safe *even “in the presence of our enemies.”* And perhaps this means our enemies stand on the outside watching us as we are safely at God’s table, but what I know about God makes me think what the psalmist really means is that God invites our enemies to the same table. God sets a table for us to sit at with our enemies so we can find a way to become something new to each other. God keeps offering us opportunities for transformation and to find ways to both forgive and be forgiven. God longs for us to find reconciliation for the people and situations that have harmed us or made us afraid or caused us to feel hatred.

While God does not ask us to make excuses for those who have hurt us, God does invite us to know the peace and healing of forgiveness, even if that won't always look like sitting at the same table. One of the greatest challenges of our faith is believing that God loves our enemies as much as God loves us. God wants our hearts to be transformed, and for enemies to become, if not friends, people whom we can see with the compassion and grace with which God sees them, and thankfully, how God sees us. The psalmist ends with "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" but the word "follow" in Hebrew has an urgency that could better be translated "pursue" or "stalk" or "chase." God's goodness and mercy isn't just wandering behind us, meandering here and there. God's goodness and mercy is pursuing, stalking, chasing us. Really, all we need to do is let it catch us. We are so busy running, pursuing other idols, chasing after the things we think will make us happy, when all the while, God's goodness and mercy is right there hoping to catch up. What will it take for us to slow down enough to let it catch us?

It is no wonder this simple little psalm has stood the test of time. There is so much packed into these six verses and really, if you take nothing from it except that God is with you always, then you will have gotten the crux, the center of the message. But, I hope you'll also let it remind you that God is our only shepherd - the only source of true protection and safety, which means you can ignore all other claims of this by other people. I hope you'll let it remind you that you are enough as you are and it is a false idol to chase after always wanting more. I hope it will remind you that God is always setting a place for you at God's table and God hopes you will find transformation at that table - that God's table will be the place where you find forgiveness and compassion and grace for yourself as well as for others, even those you've considered

enemies. And I hope it will remind you that God's goodness and mercy are chasing you down and all you need to do is slow down and let it catch you. Amen.

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<sup>[1]</sup> <https://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/112514.html>

<sup>[2]</sup> Thanks to John Fairchild for this image in his commentary.